Scoring Eagles

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DEDICATION

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.”
– Graham Greene

Those of us who teach golf to youngsters also work to instill discipline, confidence and persistence. Conversely, trying to figure out what goes on in a young person's mind when learning the golf swing is largely unknowable. Surely, their trajectory of emotion is as unpredictable as the flight of their golf ball. One can only hope to write about those struggles with a special compassion. That has been my purpose in telling this story of Zack and Alex and to give beginners in golf – and in life – some insight into how the game of golf elevates and connects us all. Surely, my life has been enriched by my connection to them.

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CHAPTER

1

The Eagle's Nest

If anyone saw me trying to get inside the gate before it opened, they'd probably call the cops. At 5:30 in the morning Zack didn't know whether the main gate at Eagle Links golf course would be open, but he figured he'd give it a try. Suddenly, bright automobile headlights pinned him to the brick gate posts. And kept going. *Whew, not the cops.* Zack leaned his bike

and golf clubs against the main gate of the Eagle Links golf course. He pushed down the handle of the heavy iron entry. It was locked. *Now what? Can't climb it. Hey, no problem*. He knew another way in. He would climb the fence near the fourth hole and drop down on the roof of the maintenance building.

Zack Parman, age 11, preparing to be the first U.S. Open champion from Tampa, was keeping a promise to himself -- to be the first to arrive on the first day of summer golf camp. He'd never been up this early. Tip-toeing out of his house quietly, he had taken some breakfast to eat later -- a carton of orange juice, a trail bar and a bagel. His mom wouldn't be up for work for another hour, and he didn't want to disturb her.

Shouldering his golf bag, Zack pedaled down the manicured sidewalk along the chain link fence guarding Eagle Links. The early morning fog was cool against his face, but would soon be replaced by another day of June heat in Florida. Coasting with both feet outstretched, he kicked at the low-

hanging gray mist, enjoying the swirls he made in the heavy, damp air.

As he turned right onto the dirt service road, a low hanging branch picked the hat off his head. *Darn! Where did that come from? Lucky it didn't scratch me all up.* He retrieved his hat and started walking his bike down the road full of potholes. *I could bang up my bike real good on this road.* He walked on, expecting any minute to see the maintenance building through the darkness.

In places along the fence, the gray curtain was beginning to lift. Familiar outlines slowly appeared inside the fence -- giant golf course mowers parked all night in the open. *They're sleeping now. But Eddie should be around soon to crank 'em up and bring 'em to life -- just like he does every summer.*

Zack was chaining his bike to the fence when a quick movement on the ground caught his eye. A watchful Florida boy, his instincts yelled out, "Snake!"-- "Racoon!"--"Alligator!" What

he saw, hopping in circles and hopelessly helpless, was a baby eagle about ten inches high without fully formed feathers, not more than a few weeks old. Zack watched as the eaglet bounced off the fence time and again, like he wanted to get back in.

He's not hurt; he's just looking for a hiding place. How did he get here? He must belong to the eagle family that lives in the golf course. He's too young to fly, so how did he get outside the fence? Wow, to see an eagle up close. Even a baby one.

Zack had read a book about eagles that said:

> Eagles teach their young to fly when they're ten or eleven weeks old by pushing them out of their high nests. The strongest of the young flap their wings and survive. The weaker ones fall to the ground far below.

Zack wondered*, Is that what happened to this little guy? What if this little eagle can't fly when the adults think he should? Do the adults care? Aren't*

they supposed to take care of the little ones?

"Hey, buddy, I'll be gentle." Carefully, Zack's hands encircled the eaglet, getting ready to scoop him up. He expected a frantic flurry of feathers in the face, but the eaglet stood quietly.

"You're awesome! You know I'm trying to help you, don't you? Your chance of living out here is probably next to zilch, but if I get you back inside the golf course, maybe."

With the help of a golf club, Zack was able to bend the bottom of the fence outward a few inches. He scooted the eaglet under the opening and released him with a shove. With a high-pitched *peep-peep-peep* and wings flapping uselessly, the eaglet bounced into the mist until Zack lost sight of him. *I wonder if I'll ever see that little guy again. I wonder if he'll make it. How will I know? Well, at least I tried.*

A booming shout brought Zack back from his day-dreaming to the bottom of the fence.

A.J.Miller

CHAPTER

2

Who's Your Brother?

"Hey, Zack! I suppose you'll be sleeping at the golf course now that school's out?"

"Hey, Eddie! You're back. I knew you'd come back to the golf course again."

Eddie Boylin had come from around the corner of the maintenance building, quick-stepped up to the fence, stuck his nose right up against Zack's and smiled the broad grin that had made him Zack's best friend. Zack hadn't talked to Eddie since he took some golf lessons from him last winter.

Four years ago, Eddie had been Zack's first instructor at golf camp when Zack was only seven. Eddie had said he needed to know more about Zack if he was going to spend a lot of time teaching him.

"Do you play golf with your dad?" was Eddie's first question.

Zack had no reason to hide the truth, even to a stranger. "Not anymore. He doesn't live around here. They're divorced."

"So how come you want to learn golf," Eddie continued.

Zack hesitated. "For when my dad comes back," he said quietly, his head turning away.

"Whatever," answered Eddie. "Are you any good?"

Zack didn't know how good he was, or could be. But he knew he'd try as hard as he could. Sometimes he tried so hard Eddie had to slow him down.

"Hey, buddy – take it easy. You've got to cool it," Eddie would remind Zack constantly. "Every swing you make is

120%. You hit the ball far for a seven year old kid, but you have no idea where the ball's going. If you think 85%, you'll straighten out those shots."

Thanks to golf, Zack was thinking percentages before he studied them in school.

One Saturday, soon after, Eddie called Zack over. "Hey, Buddy, put down your golf bag and grab your putter. I'm going to show you what golf's all about." Zack followed Eddie to the putting green. He could feel that Eddie was getting serious about something.

Eddie said, "Zack, I want you to hold the putter in your right hand only. Now, pretend you have a baby brother and you're pushing him on a swing. That's it. Keep going. Now use only your right hand. Slowly, gradually. That's it."

After a couple of tries, Zack got the idea. He started swinging his right arm with the same rhythm he'd use to push a kid on a swing. He pushed forward and the swing would start down slowly, then faster. Slowly, then faster. Slow, slow-

faster. Slow, slow-faster. Finally, Zack discovered what Eddie had been trying to teach him for days.

"It's gravity – just like Isaac Newton!" Zack was excited.

"Except in golf it's called acceleration -- and tempo -- the two things you need to know to play golf well," explained Eddie. "You use it on every shot – putting, chipping and driving."

From that moment on, Zack was a golfer.

That was four years ago, but today was the first day of a brand new golf camp and he and his buddy Eddie were back together!

"Eddie, what's college like?" Zack had missed Eddie. Did you miss not being home? Did you get to play a lot of golf? Wait'll I climb over this fence."

Zack knew more about Eddie than he knew about any other grownup. Eddie was eighteen years old – going on nineteen in October. He had been a junior golfer at Eagle Links just like Zack and was so good he earned a golf scholarship

to Florida State.

Zack trusted Eddie for more than golf lessons. He was Zack's "go-to" man. Last year, when Zack's bike got a flat tire, Eddie grabbed some tools and a rubber patch from the maintenance building and fixed it. Another time when Zack didn't have lunch money, Eddie made him a loan. Whenever Eddie was driving the truck picking up range balls, Zack would wave at him and try to hit a ball off the cage. Zack felt they were brothers.

"So this is what? -- your second year at golf camp?" Eddie asked.

"No, it's my fourth. Don't you remember? I was only seven when I started. I'm eleven now," Zack said, wondering why Eddie didn't remember as well as he did.

"OK. Four years. You hit the ball better since I saw you Christmastime?" Eddie started gassing up one of the mowers.

"Oh yeah. Watch this." Zack drew back an imaginary golf club and swung hard, faking a swish.

“Alright, kid. I’ll see you later. I’ve got work to do.” Eddie turned and walked away.

“OK, I’ll see yuh.” Suddenly Zack felt uncomfortable. Something had changed, like in a bad dream when the more you reach for something, the further away it gets.

CHAPTER

3

Pushed Out of the Nest

Zack had time to himself before the golf course opened. As he walked past the maintenance building, the mist began to lift. The outline of distant trees became visible against the growing morning light.

if I hurry, I'll bet I can see the sunrise,. Zack started ran toward the highest point on the course -- the fourth tee. He turned the green bench so it faced east and retrieved his breakfast from his golf bag. He took a sip of juice first, then fumbled with the trail bar wrapper, taking quick glances at the horizon to be sure he didn't miss the exact moment. Now munching on the bar and sipping the juice, he waited. His eyes

hurt from staring. And then it began, the fiery red curve of the sun edged over the gray horizon. Orange fingers of light streamed through the trees, chasing the last of the morning mist. As he finished eating, the full brilliance of the sun lighted the fairways from dull to shiny emerald green, and the sand in the bunkers glistened gaily. From where he sat, everything changed as if it were intended for him alone. He couldn't remember when he had enjoyed breakfast so much.

* * * * * * *

At 8 a.m. Zack walked into the clubhouse – a half hour before camp started. From behind, a car door slammed and a new kid came through the door carrying a really sharp set of clubs.

Zack turned to him. "How you doin'?"

The new kid was a little taller than Zack and from the way he flipped his golf bag off his shoulder and set it down, he

looked like a real golfer. *Maybe this new kid is someone I've been waiting for*.

"You're new this year." Zack knew everyone. And everyone knew him.

"Yeah, we just moved here."

"What's your name?" Zack smiled.

"Alex. What's yours?"

"Zack. What school do you go to?"

"I don't know yet. Cleveland is the closest, my mom said. But we need to register. Where do you go?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, I know Cleveland. That's over on the other side of town. I know a kid who goes there. I go to Morgan. That's just a few blocks from here."

Everything in Zack's life was just a few blocks from the golf course. If not at school, he'd be at the golf course all year 'round. With his English racing bike, Zack didn't depend on his mom to drive him. He just got on his bike and he was there. Any day of the week, any time of day.

"You been playing golf long?" asked Zack, as the boys settled on the floor with the other campers waiting for Coach Phil

to get started.

"Two years," mumbled Alex, turning abruptly away from Zack as Coach Phil appeared.

Standing on a raised platform, Coach Phil Lockhart, six-feet tall, raised his arms over his head as a signal for quiet. Zack was glad to see him again.

When Zack's mom first brought him to golf camp, he had asked her why such an old guy would want to hang out with a bunch of kids. But over time, Coach Phil had given Zack a lot of help – more like a grandpa who knew a lot about golf. Zack never had a grandpa. He hardly remembered his dad.

Zack recognized some of the thirty-four faces looking up at the Coach. A few of them had been to golf camp before, a few more had been to the Saturday morning clinics. But Zack could tell that most of them had no idea what they were here for, or what was expected of them: either they hadn't brought golf clubs or weren't curious about the golf books and pictures of golf champions hanging on the

walls. Sitting together were four girls – two were little kids -- seven years old; the third one Zack didn't know. And then there was Keisha who was eleven also.

"Good morning, boys and girls," the Coach began. "Thanks for being on time. Being on time is very important in golf. When you play in a tournament, you're assigned a time to begin play – a tee-off time – and you can't be even one minute late or else you're disqualified. That means you can't play -- you have to go home. So by being on time and ready to learn, you're already doing what it takes to be a good golfer."

"We're going to have fun this week. We'll have fun and be learning something every day. If you've been to our golf program before, you know there's still a lot you can learn. And our promise to you is you'll keep on having fun."

Zack looked around him at the many beginners who showed up, and if he could have, would have added, "*And it takes a lot of hard work too!"*

The clubhouse door opened noisily,

interrupting the Coach. Every kid turned to see who it was.

That's Josh what's-his-face and he's carrying a brand new Titleist golf bag and brand new golf clubs. Oh, man! Are those Callaways?

Zack had never owned a new, complete set until this year. His clubs weren't professional, but he knew that knowing how you hit the ball was more important than the name on the club.

"You're late, Josh," Coach Phil said over all the heads. Josh took a seat on the floor at the back, taking a moment longer than needed to let everyone see his new clubs. Zack wasn't impressed.

The Coach continued, "Up here now -- be with me," and waited for the kids' attention. "Like anything else worth doing, if you want to learn to play golf, you'll have to pay attention. It takes time to learn golf, so you have to be patient also. Can anyone name something you didn't understand that you tried to learn?"

"Yeah, school work," came the response from one of the older boys in

back.

Like the emptying of a school building at the last tick of the clock on the last day of school, the campers erupted in laughter.

The Coach waited for the kids to settle down.

"Well, think about learning to ride a bike," he continued. When you first tried to ride a bike you fell off didn't you? Well, maybe you were able to catch yourself and didn't fall down, but I'll bet it took a few tries before you got rolling, didn't it? That took patience. And I'll bet most of you had someone to help you keep rolling so you could get the feel of the handlebars and what it was like to steer. You really had to pay attention, didn't you?"

The Coach gave this same speech last year, Zack thought*. I like the Coach's stories, but why can't he come up with a different story? Besides, most of these kids don't ride bikes much. They get driven around by their moms or dads.*

"OK," the Coach continued, "what was it like the first time you tried biking

up a really steep hill? You got tired and stopped. You got off the bike, didn't you? You walked your bike up the hill thinking you couldn't do it, right? Pretty soon someone told you to zig and zag across the hill. Suddenly it became easier to get to the top and you didn't have to stop. Right?"

Someone called out, "OK, Coach, but that's a lot of work. You said golf would be fun."

"It'll be more fun than anything you've done up to now, because you'll put more into it. Fun is making up your mind you're going to be successful and not letting doubts get in your way. To be successful you have to listen. You have to pay more attention and be patient. Are you willing to do that?"

You tell 'em, Coach, Zack nodded. *Some kids don't listen to the Coach. They think they can figure it out by themselves. Why does the Coach spend so much time on those kids?*

Coach Phil continued. "Sometimes in life we don't believe we can do something

we haven't tried before. So we don't really, really try. But when we do try, when we give it 100%, we surprise ourselves. And feel proud of ourselves. And what seemed difficult, is not only do-able, it becomes fun."

Now came the part Zack was waiting for.

"I can assure you -- if you think of this week like you're zig-zagging your bike up the hill, you will accomplish a great deal. You can't expect to become expert at anything right away. There'll be lots of little hills to climb – and one or two big ones. The important thing is that you give it your best effort."

Zack thought*, I'm pumped. You told 'em, Coach. Good job.*

"So, does anyone have anything to say, or to ask? No one? Ok, when we gather again at the end of today, I'll want you to tell me what you learned."

"The folks behind me with the "Golf Staff" tee shirts are here to help you have fun! "Now count off in fours – starting over there in the first row. You're one,

you’re two -- keep going.”

Zack got up quickly and leaned down to Alex saying, “Let’s go – fast. Let’s not get stuck behind the little kids. I want to show you a really cool shot I’ve been working on.”

CHAPTER

4

Fighting the Crosswind

"I'm glad we got to be in the same group," Alex said to Zack as they approached the putting green. The campers had been divided up into four groups – putting, chipping, pitching and full swing. Alex, Zack and six others, the "Eagles" as Coach Phil called them, were stationed at the far end of the practice putting green, while the newbies occupied the end closest to the clubhouse and the restrooms. The oldest girl, Keisha, was also an Eagle.

Today, Coach Phil had put himself in charge of the Eagles. The Eagles had the perseverance and skills needed to take advanced instruction and build on it. Since Alex was new to town, no one knew if he was good or not, but he claimed to

be an Eagle, so the Coach said he'd let him prove it. Zack knew it wouldn't take long to find out, one way or another.

Without a word, the Eagles went to work.

"So Alex, here's what we do," began Zack. First, we set up a hole with six, 3-foot putts. You have to make all six in a row before you go on. Next is the lag putt drill. We stand about 20-feet inside the green and lag putts back to the edge of the green. The last drill we do is from the bottom of the slope over there so we can practice our speed. Then we start at the top of the slope and do downhill putts. And that's it."

"I can do that," Alex responded immediately.

Zack was glad to hear Alex was on top of things. Alex seemed to be a cool kid -- someone who was athletic, loved the game and who could challenge him on the golf course. Zack wouldn't have told anyone else, but he was a little bored with the other kids' game. For the past year, he had won almost every tournament

played at Eagle Links. He wanted more competition. Zack was ready to ask Coach Phil to sign him up for one of the regional tournaments coming up in a few weeks. He wanted to find out how good his game really was -- to compare his game with kids from other towns on the best golf courses.

By now, Alex had set up six balls at 3-foot distances around the nearest hole and was beginning to work on his stroke. Alex had good form: he played the ball close to his feet with his eyes directly over the ball. His grip was in his palms and light, with both thumbs pointing straight down the shaft. Zack noticed that Alex pointed his left elbow at the target while he stroked the first putt. While most golfers putt with a slightly inside-to-square-to-inside stroke, Alex's stroke was more on line throughout the swing. Zack decided he was going to try that elbow idea sometime soon.

Alex stroked ball number five and it lipped out on the right. Taking a quick step forward, Alex tapped the ball in and

took a step back to hit his sixth and final ball.

"Hold it, Alex," Zack interrupted. "You need to make all six in a row. You missed that last putt. You've got to start all over."

"That's OK," answered Alex, as he sank the sixth ball. "I've got the touch for 3-footers. I'm going over to the lag area."

"Hey, wait," argued Zack. "The game is about making six in a row. If you don't, you have to set them up again and do like the game says."

"Oh yeah, you haven't putted yet. Let's see you do all six in a row," challenged Alex.

"I can do six. I've done it lots of times." Zack was annoyed. He knew what he could do; he didn't have to prove it. But he decided he would do it this once just to show Alex he could.

"Watch this," glowered Zack. First ball – plunk. Second ball – plunk. Third ball – plunk. Fourth ball – plunk. Fifth ball – plunk. Sixth ball – plunk. The entire demonstration took no more than

30 seconds – a little more time than Alex needed to sink just one ball.

When the last ball fell, Alex didn't say a word, but turned and, twirling his putter like a drum major, joined the kids working on their lag putts.

Zack stared after Alex and didn't notice Keisha walking up behind him.

Zack had befriended Keisha three summers ago when her father had dropped her off at golf camp. As an eager golfer, Zack had been more impressed with her father than with Keisha. Her father was built like a football player with big biceps and a strong neck. He looked tough, but spoke softly to Keisha. Later Keisha told him her father was an amateur golfer who had won the championship four times on his home course where only black people played. He went on to become city champion, beating the best in the area – white and black. Long before that, her grandfather played and won tournaments before African-Americans were allowed to play with white players.

“You mean your grandfather played golf? Way back then?”

“Sure,” Keisha answered smiling. Zack rubbed the back of his head in wonderment.

He wouldn’t let on, but Zack envied her for the help she had learning to play golf -- about how her dad helped improve her game. Her grandfather too.

Zack had learned golf mostly on his own after his dad left. Coach Phil and Eddie helped him whenever he asked.

Father and Son tournaments were days when Zack didn’t have anything to do. So he helped the Coach with the scoreboard, or helped Eddie set up lunch. Keeping busy helped the tournament day go by, but it wasn’t much consolation for Zack. When the kids and their dads left for home, they were all excited talking about their day together. Zack knew if his dad were here they could talk about how well he had played, or how he could fix his swing, or how he….. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t going to happen.

Zack discovered soon that Keisha

was a good player. Whenever she started something, she kept at it until she became really good. She once told Zack that when she wasn't playing her best, if she kept trying she had more fun than days when it was easy.

"I don't take the game as seriously as you do, Zack," she once said. "I play to have fun."

"Yeah, but you like to win as much as I do, don't you?" Zack was totally serious.

Keisha avoided his question. "I saw those six putts, Zack. Nice, very nice. I don't think anyone else around here can do that as fast as you can." Keisha laughed and poked Zack gently with her putter which was a signal for him to lighten up.

"Ow!" He mouthed silently, bending over in pretend pain.

"What is it with that guy, Alex?" Zack motioned toward Alex who was working on the lag drill alone, apart from the other kids. A moment later, Alex turned abruptly and walked towards the driving range where the short game

session would be held.

"You know what I think about Alex," Keisha said, suddenly serious. "I think he's very lonely. He's looking for a friend. Did you tell him you want to be his friend?" she asked.

"C'mon, Keisha. Boys don't talk that way. But he does seem to be a nice guy even if he's a little strange."

"Why don't you figure out a way to tell him that?" Keisha insisted. You may not like some of the things he does, but it looks like he wants to get along. None of us wants to be alone – that's what my granddad says."

The word "alone" zoomed large in Zack's imagination. He envisioned solitary eagles flying endlessly, searching for a safe place of their own.

"Zack, what are you working on today?" Keisha asked.

Zack always had a plan, a goal to improve his swing or to hit a new kind of shot.

"Hey, Kei, did you see Tiger on TV last weekend? He was behind some trees,

so he hit this low shot under the branches, landed on the green and stopped dead. The announcer called it a 'zinger' or 'stinger' or something. I'm asking Coach Phil to teach it to me."

By now Zack and Keisha had arrived at the driving range. Keisha started swinging a couple of clubs to warm up.

She set a ball on a low tee and looked up at Zack. "I saw it too. It was a great shot, but my Granddad says there's nothing new about it. He's been using it since he started playing. He calls it his knock-down shot. Want to see it again?"

Keisha picked out her seven iron, and, with a shortened swing, sent the ball low enough to go in one end of an open garage door and out the other – straight to the green, 100 yards away. It skipped once and stopped dead.

"Whoa, Keisha!" Zack was impressed. "That was great! I didn't know you could hit that shot. I've never seen you practice it."

"I haven't seen you since spring break," Keisha reminded him. Would you

like me to teach it to you?"

"That's OK. I think I can figure it out," Zack answered as if he were being asked an algebra question in school and didn't want the teacher to know he hadn't a clue. The fact is Zack *didn't* have a clue. He did notice Keisha's short back swing and follow-through and figured that must have something to do with it.

"Is that so? Well, good luck by yourself. Maybe I'll see you at lunch." Keisha turned abruptly from Zack and went to work with her driver, not looking back.

Zack was determined to master this knock-down shot. He teed it up low, and with his seven iron took a smooth swing. The ball seemed to go a little lower than usual, so he figured he was on to something. Pumped up now, he really banged his next stroke sending the ball soaring high and to the left. The next ball went higher and hooked even farther left. Time after time the ball went higher than he wanted and off line. With each attempt, he made sure he used the

shorter swing that Keisha had shown him, but only once, in that first attempt, did the ball fly low and straight.

After wasting all six balls, he stomped the ground, threw down his club, and just stood there, hands on his hips looking out to the yellow flagstick. *What's going on? What's so hard about this shot that I can't kit it but Keisha can?*

Coach Phil's voice interrupted his frustration.

"Zack, what are you working on?" The Coach had seen Zack chopping away at the ball with short back swings.

"I'm trying to hit a knock-down shot. Keisha showed it to me, and I thought I could figure it out."

"OK, here's what you need to do. First of all, slow down your swing speed. The harder you hit the ball, the higher it will go. Now, just play the ball farther back in your stance, make sure the club head is square to your target. Now use that short swing. But keep it smooth and don't try to hit it hard." Zack hit a few more shots following the Coach's advice

and the balls flew lower, but not very straight.

"That'll do for now," said the Coach.

He seemed satisfied, but Zack wasn't.

The Coach started to leave. "Oh, Zack", the coach called back, "I've set up a match with you and Alex in the afternoon tournament. I'll see you after lunch." He trotted away, heading for the clubhouse.

Zack stopped his stroke in mid-swing, shaken by the Coach's unexpected announcement. *Hey, Coach. Whoa! I don't want to play teams. I don't want to be teamed up with anyone – even Alex. Why can't we just play singles? Why don't you ask us what <u>we</u> want?*

Zack's problems were just beginning. *How am I going to get along with Alex?*

CHAPTER

5

Whom Do You Trust?

It’s not that Zack didn’t trust his game to hold up in team play. What he really wanted was to take his new shots to the golf course -- the knock-down shot and the putting stroke he saw Alex using. Finally, he realized he had the rest of this week and all summer to work on new stuff.

So he walked over to the short game area to work on his basic drills. He took out his seven iron, nine iron and pitching wedge. Eddie Boylin had told him very clearly -- learn to hit chip shots to the green using more than one club.

Zack dropped a bunch of balls on the ground getting ready to practice. From Zack's blind side, one of the little kids who had been watching Zack walked in front of him, stopped and said, "Will you teach me to play this shot?"

"Hey kid, I'm chipping here. Anyway, what's your name?" Zack laughed. He reminded him of how he had been when he first started playing. Pushy.

"My name is Ben and I'm seven years old."

"OK, Ben. Stand over there where you'll be safe and I'll show you what I'm doing. When you get real good at this shot you'll save a lot of bogeys. Do you know what a bogey is?

"Yes, it's one over par," Ben answered confidently.

"Right. So here we go," Zack

continued. “This is my seven iron. I use it for a long chip shot over tall grass. The ball needs to get up in the air a little then roll most of the way to the hole like a long putt. You’re learning putting now, aren’t you?”

The kid nodded, his hands clasped behind his back, giving Zack his total attention.

“OK, this is just like a putt. I’m just using an arm swing. No hands. See that?” Zack stroked a low, rolling shot onto the green.

“All right. Now watch this nine iron.” The ball looped gently in the air about half the distance to the hole and rolled the rest of the way.

“Last is the pitching wedge. It should go in the air almost to the hole and roll just a little on the ground.” The shot went farther than Zack intended.

“Anyway, the idea is to use the club that gets the ball on the green right away,” Zack explained. “If the hole is close to the edge of the green, don’t use the seven iron. Use the nine or wedge.

See how that works? OK, see yuh."

Ben trotted off to be with his buddies, waving his golf club, excited like he had just found a dollar bill on the ground.

Zack began setting up with his seven iron to do some serious work. As he lined up his first shot, he noticed Alex on the other side of the green.

Alex was standing five yards beyond the green practicing chip shots. The flagstick was about fifteen yards inside the green. His first shot popped up and landed short of the green. He set up for his next shot, took a longer swing, and the ball flew over the flagstick and almost hit some kids on the other side.

All of a sudden, Zack was more interested in Alex's practice session than his own.

Zack wasn't the only one watching. The other Eagles and some little kids had heard about Alex and hung around wanting to see how good he really was.

Stepping away from the ball, Alex took one, two, then a third practice swing,

trying to get the feel

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for how much to accelerate the club through the high grass. He aimed his wedge, set his feet and took a swing. He hit the ball with the leading edge of the wedge. The ball skidded across the green completely out of control.

Zack didn't know which was funnier -- the giggling from the kids or the look on Alex's face.

Alex waved off the little kids. "Get out of here, you creeps!" He set the club behind his back and began turning and stretching as if to excuse the bad shot. He noticed Zack watching. Alex stared back and said, "I'm trying something new. I'm using a sand wedge because it gets the ball up very high so it stops soft and doesn't roll. It's called a flop shot."

"It doesn't look easy," said Zack. "Have you been working on it long?"

"I saw it on TV last weekend," answered Alex.

Zack thought, Alex, you had better not use that shot in this afternoon's tournament. Not if you're going to play on <u>my</u> team.

“Alex, the Coach teamed us up in the afternoon tournament. We get points for tournament scores and I want to keep my ‘Eagle’ rank.”

“OK,” was Alex’s only answer, as he continued to practice.

“Hey, Alex. If we’re going to be a team and win, I need you to play well. OK?”

“Look,” he glanced over to Zack, “you don’t have to worry about me.”

CHAPTER

6

Eddie Sets Zack Straight

At lunch the Eagles sat together at two long tables in the clubhouse dining room near the picture windows overlooking the golf course. Watching the little kids eat was a joke. It was like watching them putt. Most of what they tried to put in their mouths never found its way into the hole.

When Zack arrived in the dining room, he found he was the last one in the food line. Taking a tray from the stack, he caught a glimpse of his buddy Eddie beyond the open kitchen partition making sandwiches.

“Hey, Eddie! You do it all around here, don’t you? How about making me a super-size?”

Recognizing Zack’s voice on the other side of the wall, Eddie wiped his hands on a towel and walked out to meet him.

“I’m done for the day. But it looks like everybody’s been through the line at least once, so it's OK if you take a sandwich for yourself. What’s new at camp?” Eddie tossed the towel into the kitchen.

Zack started to reply with ‘Everything’s cool,’ but it got caught in his throat. Zack hoped Eddie could see something was on his mind.

“What’s going on, kid?”

“Eddie, when a guy plays the six-ball putting game and misses a putt but doesn’t start over, how serious is that? I mean, everyone should play the game the same way. Right?”

“Oh, I see.” Eddie ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath and, putting his hand behind Zack’s shoulder,

guided him over to a corner where they could have some privacy.

"Why do you hang around with dopey guys?" "You weren't betting, were you?"

"No, nothing like that. I explained the game to this new guy Alex and he seemed to like it OK, but he copped out when he missed a putt. Then he walked away without saying anything."

"He just walked away? No one said anything? You didn't call him out about not starting over?"

"Well, sure. Then he said I couldn't make six in a row. But I showed him. Then he just walked away. Later, he was practicing chip shots with a sand wedge and was really spraying 'em. He says he's been playing for two years, but he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Look, don't let it bother you. The guy's a jerk. Forget about it," Eddie insisted.

"Yeah, but was he cheating? We're going to be in the same group all day for five days. I don't want to not talk to him,

but I don’t know what to say?”

“Look, he wasn’t really cheating, Zack. Everybody stretches the rules when they feel like it. There’s nothing to keep you from talking to him or practicing with him.”

“OK. I can do that. Good thing, too, because the coach has us teamed up after lunch.”

“Well, go get ‘em! Like I said, fohgettabodit. Yuh know wod I mean?” Eddie laughed at his own joke.

“Yeah, I can do that.” Zack was trying to be cool for Eddie, but felt deep down that Alex would mess things up.

CHAPTER

7

A Surprise For Zack

Coach Phil had set up two long tables with chairs in front of the tournament scoreboard. A few players and their parents were starting to gather around – excited to see the pairings. It's the tradition in golf to post the players' names in neatly printed Gothic letters. On the board were sixteen names paired by age level in the order they were to tee off – the boys' competition separated from the girls'. At the very bottom of the board were "Zack Parman" and "Alex Redondo" with the letter "M" bracketing their names.

Coach Phil was sitting at the table checking the scorecards against the scoreboard to be sure the pairings and tee times were correct. The older campers always teed off first because they played faster. Zack waited until the coach had handed the scorecards to the starter before speaking.

"Coach, what's the letter "M" mean next to our names?

"I told you before lunch, Zack. The

“M” stands for “Match”. I have you and Alex set up for nine-hole match play.”

Zack didn’t have the words to protest. All he could do was stand there with a blank look on his face like his opponent had just sunk a 40-foot putt to beat him on the final hole. Match play? he thought. I’ve never played ‘match play’ before.

“Coach, does Alex know it’s match play?”

“Why don’t you find him and tell him.”

Hoping to spot Alex, Zack checked out the crowd heading for the first tee. The little kids were running, some dancing down the cart path until they disappeared behind the trees. *Why do they have to be so noisy and goofy?* Zack was getting edgy. Looking back, Zack saw Alex coming out of the clubhouse gulping a soft drink.

“Alex, let’s go! We’re first to tee off and we’ll be late,” Zack half shouted.

“Hey, I’m here. I’m ready.” With his golf bag over his shoulder, Alex strode

past Zack.

"Wait a minute, Alex. I've got news for you. The coach wants us to play a nine-hole match. Not stroke play. Match play."

"A match?" Alex stumbled to a stop. Then, with a big smile Zack didn't believe, said, "That's cool. Let's do it."

Alex led the way through the crowd to the white tee box. Far above, an eagle circled -- watching patiently.

CHAPTER

8

Remember to Breathe

I don’t have a clue, Zack thought, wincing. *The rules for match play are a lot different from stroke play. All you need in stroke play is obey the rules and add up the strokes. If you get a penalty or don’t follow the rules, you lose a stroke or two. You can make up the strokes later. But in match play, if you don’t follow the rules you lose the hole and you can't make it up.*

The first hole was a par four, dogleg right, 320 yards long with the fairway sloping to the right and a sand bunker on

the right-front of the green.

Alex seemed relaxed. He took out his driver, made one practice swing while lining up the shot, stepped up to the ball and let it rip. The ball rose swiftly and landed about 110 yards from the green. Smiling confidently, Alex walked around Zack who half stumbled getting up the slope to the tee.

Zack teed up his ball, carefully adjusting the height so half the ball was over the top of the club head. Taking one step back, he took a practice swing, then another, stepped up to the ball and set his posture. Something felt uncomfortable. He wiggled and wriggled, but he knew something was wrong with his set-up. He stepped away from the ball and took a big practice swing – more like a swing for baseball than golf.

Why did I do that? he thought. Why am I so nervous? I've played this course lots of times. I'm not going to think about anything – just play.

This time he set up to the ball with barely a glance at his target. His swing

was hurried. The ball started right of center, sliced some more and rolled off the right side of the fairway into the rough.

Because Zack's ball followed the roll of the fairway, his drive was a few yards longer than Alex's. Alex was "away," so it was his turn to play. The flagstick was on the right side of the green, in front, protected by the sand bunker. Choosing a nine-iron, Alex aimed for the middle of the green. He contacted the ball a little too thin; it sailed too far, bounced once and rolled over the green, 10 yards from the hole.

Zack found his ball sitting down in the deep grass, a shot he had played many times. He had about 90 yards to the green and could easily carry over the sand bunker with his pitching wedge. Playing the ball at the center of his stance, he set his wrists quickly as he swung back. The ball flew out clean and high and straight at the flag. If the distance was right, it would be a really good shot. But it came down in the

bunker.

From in back of the green, Alex stubbed his first chip, hit his second 10 feet from the hole and three putted for a seven. Zack's shot out of the bunker was long. He needed three putts for a six.

Zack had won the first hole – barely, without style or grace.

In silence, the boys hoisted their bags onto their shoulders and followed the cart path over a knoll to the second tee. Even though Zack had the early lead, he hadn't hit one good shot on that hole. He was trying to stay focused.

The second hole was another par 4, but much longer at 410 yards. Really a par five for the boys. Their tee shots had to be long. It was a double dogleg – first left up a hill and then downhill to the right. The tee box was up against thick woods on the right side so it was important to hit your tee shot to the left to have a good angle to the green.

Zack had the honor. His drive went straight down the middle and stopped at the top of the hill 200 yards from the

green.

Alex aimed down the middle, but pulled his drive low and left about 175 yards out. He wouldn't be able to reach the green in two. Advantage Zack.

Zack noticed that Alex had an uphill-sidehill lie, and his ball would go left if he didn't adjust his stance and keep his lower body still.

Choosing a three wood and aiming right, Alex's ball shot off the clubface, but to the far right, short of the bunkers and into the rough, up against the out-of-bounds fence.

For his second shot, Zack decided not to try for the green. The fairway narrowed into a funnel and the green was well protected by trees and bunkers. His plan was to play short and chip onto the green for an up-and-down par or, at worst, a bogey. From the slightly downhill lie, the ball left his five iron hot and low and plowed into a greenside bunker.

As Alex approached his ball at the fence, he discovered the surface was hard sand, packed down by the heavy

maintenance equipment. As hard as concrete. Fearful of not hitting the ball at all, he took a drop from the fence for a one stroke penalty. And was still away.

Zack could see Alex had chosen his sand wedge just as he had done on the practice green that morning. Alex hit the ball fat and it plopped into the slope of the green. Now in mowed grass, Alex used his sand wedge again, expecting to land it softly near the flagstick. But this time he bladed it. The ball went flying out of control and got caught in the heavy grass off the far edge of the green about 15 yards from the flagstick. For a second it looked like Alex was going to slam his club into the turf. But he didn't. He just stood there like a sailboat stalled in the middle of nowhere, waiting for some wind to come up and get him going again. Far above, an eagle circled – just waiting.

Zack next shot from the bunker barely cleared the high lip, ran off the green, leaving him 35 feet to the flagstick.

Alex hit a pretty good pitch shot and the ball went 12 feet past the hole. The

putt coming back broke more than he thought and he missed a three-footer for a total of eight.

Zack looked at his lie in the heavy grass just two feet off the green and decided this would be the time to use the four wood chip shot he had seen on television. Zack forgot one of golf's primary rules: don't try a shot in competition until you've worked on it in practice. The club made good contact with the ball – so good that it went 15 feet past the hole. Zack was happy to get down in two from there. His score for the hole was six.

Zack was two up with seven to go. But he wasn't at all proud of the way he was playing.

The boys trudged on to the third hole. They didn't talk to each other. They didn't look at each other.

Zack heard a small voice inside him saying, *It's time to get going. You do all that practicing. You should be playing better.*

He looked at Alex who was walking

with his head down. Alex’s face was blank.

CHAPTER

9

Carrying a Rule Book Isn't Enough

The third hole, a par three, was 167

yards long. It was the only scenic hole on the golf course – and the most difficult. From the tee box, the fairway plunged steeply downhill. At the bottom, a creek crossed in front of the elevated green and disappeared into the wetlands. Teeing off from up high, the hole played shorter than 167 yards. But a weak shot would roll into the creek and result in a bogey or worse. The wetlands on the right were out of bounds.

The boys stood next to the tee facing west towards the green. By now, the mid-afternoon sun was a searing fireball. The glare off the fairway made it difficult for Zack to keep his eyes on the target. Alex tilted his cap to shield against the sun.

Zack held the honor again, and took his time choosing a club. Since he wasn't hitting the ball well yet, he decided to lay up short of the creek. That would leave him a full wedge to the hole. If he could get it close, he might get his par. If not, he'd do no worse than bogey. And on this hole, bogey was a good score.

Meanwhile, Alex dropped his bag on the ground, walked into the tee box and

stared at the challenge ahead. Zack knew something was going on with Alex because it was Zack's honor and Alex shouldn't even be in the tee box. Alex walked back to his bag and without any regard for Zack, brought his entire bag of clubs onto the tee box. He started to pull out a long iron, then jammed it back in. Zack watched Alex's unsteady fingers slide across to the next compartment holding the fairway woods. Still without a club in his hands, Alex turned to face the creek and the green beyond. Then Alex said something Zack would remember for a long time.

"Zack, let's play this hole from the red tees up front. It's only 154 yards from there. If we both agree, it'll be alright."

Zack couldn't tell how much time went by before he answered. It seemed like the inside of his eyeballs were a movie screen and he was watching himself when he was a little kid.

His mom had brought home a box of bubble gum and hid it high up inside one of her big kitchen pots. When he was

sure she wasn't around, he climbed up the counter, stood as high as he could and opened the cabinet door. Stretching still higher, he nudged aside the pot lid and reached inside, grabbing as many bubble gums as he could hold. But he forgot one thing: he needed both hands to climb down. With one hand filled with bubble gum, he lost his grip, yet in desperation managed to break his fall as he slipped to the kitchen floor on his butt. Pots and pans bounced off his head, setting off a clanging alarm his mom couldn't miss.

She came running and gasped when she saw Zack lying on his back surrounded by her best cookware. Zack didn't say he had fallen.

"What happened, sweetheart?" She sat beside him on the kitchen floor, holding him in her arms, comforting him. "A pot fell on my head," he volunteered, rubbing his head with a hand that carried the incriminating scent of bubble gum.

Zack's head was buzzing. Didn't she see the bubble gum all over the floor? Why didn't she say something? Desperate

to hide what he had been doing, Zack pretended he was hurt a little more than he really was. And what do you know, his mom bought it. That was the last he ever heard of the gum-in-a-pot episode, but he would never forget how bad he felt trying to fool his mom. Or how good it was to know, without making him feel guilty, she had forgiven him.

"Well, Zack – what's it gonna be…?" Alex's voice brought Zack back to the present. "…are you playing from the white tees or the red?"

Zack knew the ordinary rules of golf. The problem was he didn't know a rule to cover the thing Alex wanted to do. What he did know was you don't weasel out just because you aren't playing well. He had this uncomfortably familiar feeling that if he took the easy way out he would be sorry.

"I don't think we should, Alex," Zack answered.

"Why not?" Alex challenged.

"We've been playing the whites from the start…and besides, it's against the

rules," Zack lied, hoping Alex would believe him.

"There's no rule about changing tees if we agree to do it." Alex was defiant. "Do you have a rule book? Show me!"

Alex was bluffing and Zack knew it. But Zack was bluffing too. He didn't know how else to change Alex's mind.

Zack reached into his golf bag, pulled out his rule book and opened it to the index. He read about "Match Play" but it was no help. He found the section on "Teeing Ground" – nothing there about changing tees. Zack couldn't find anything in the rules to convince Alex he was wrong.

Zack put the rule book back in his bag. "Alex, you can play from whatever tee you want. I'm playing from the whites."

Alex wiped his forehead with his sleeve, picked up his bag and headed down to the reds.

CHAPTER

10

A Creek? What Creek?

Zack had his six iron out and was ready to hit his tee shot. Just at that moment, Alex arrived at the red tee 35

yards ahead. Zack addressed his ball and took a final look at the flat landing area in front of the creek, ready to swing. But Alex as moving around and distracting him.

"Alex, you need to get out of the way. It's dangerous where you're standing."

Silently, Alex picked up his bag, backed off the tee box and retreated a safe distance into the shadows on the left.

Zack went through his routine. Ready at last, he took a full swing and the ball took off crisply, rose high and landed softly 20 yards short of the creek. Just like he had planned!

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Now Alex was up. He pulled a five wood from his bag, pushed the bag to the ground and strode back into the tee box. He bent down, jabbed the tee into the ground, straightened up, set his posture, gave the green one last look and swung.

Standing back at the white tee, Zack had to squint against the sun to follow the flight of Alex's ball. It was up in the air and straight enough, but would it carry over the creek? The ball not only carried the creek, it landed on the green to a dead stop 5 feet past the flag.

Alex jumped straight up in the air, ran for his bag and without waiting for Zack, scurried for the green. Zack hurried after him.

Zack arrived at his ball and examined his lie. The ball was sitting up nicely in the grass. He knew how to play it. Since the green was above him, he knew the ball would land softly and wouldn't roll far. He just needed to hit it the right distance. Opening the face of his sand wedge, he took a smooth, three-quarter backswing. A crisp click of the club head on the ball told him he had

made perfect contact. The ball sailed almost straight up and, for a moment, it looked like Zack had hit it too far. But the ball landed on the green four feet from the hole, rolled forward, kissed the flagstick and -- dropped in!

Zack wanted to cheer and shout and jump up and down. Instead, he grabbed his bag and ran across the small wooden bridge that spanned the creek. Reaching the green, he saw Alex over his putt and realized that if Alex sank his five foot putt they would halve the hole -- it would be a tie. Zack removed the flagstick from the hole, picked out his ball and stepped back so Alex could putt out. Far above, an eagle circled -- watching patiently.

Some kids like to practice golf as much as they like competing. They make up games on the putting green like the six-ball game Zack had shown Alex that morning. They imagine they're playing in the most important tournament in America, and if they sink this one putt they'll be the United States champion. So they practice being the champion. Zack was one of those kids. But, for Alex, that

five foot putt looked like a mile. There was no way he was going to make it, and he didn’t.

CHAPTER

11

There's No Hiding in Golf

The next hole ran along the fence line down to the maintenance building. Zack figured Eddie had already gone home. He sure didn’t want to run into

him. He didn't want anyone to know he and Alex were not playing from the same tees.

As Zack and Alex neared the fourth tee, Zack caught a movement from down the fence line. It was Eddie standing next to a tree alongside the next green. Zack was sure Eddie would figure out what he and Alex were doing. He didn't want Eddie to see him, especially if he – Alex – was violating the rules. He wasn't going to lie to Eddie just to protect Alex.

The boys teed off. Zack wasn't focused and almost missed his tee shot completely. It was a low line drive that luckily went pretty straight, scooting to a stop 10 yards in front of the green.

Alex's shot floated high and settled in the rough, short of the green behind a bunker. Alex's second shot with a wedge got up fast and landed well beyond the hole. Zack hit his pitching wedge to within 5 feet of the hole.

Eddie walked onto the green and Zack could tell he was searching the boys' faces.

“What’s the score, guys?” Eddie asked, breaking the silence. He pulled out the flagstick and stepped back to allow the boys to putt out.

Zack and Alex pretended they were busy concentrating. Finally, Zack said, “If Alex sinks this putt, I’ll be three up”.

Alex had a fifteen foot putt, but pretty straight. He lined up his putter, took his stance and stroked it. The ball grazed the right edge of the hole and spun away to the left.

Zack made his putt and won the hole.

“So that puts you four up after four holes” announced Eddie as Zack picked up his bag.

“Yes,” said Zack quietly.

He turned to Alex and said, ‘Nice try’, but Alex was walking quickly off the green without a word. Zack thought he saw tears running down Alex’s face. In fact, Alex was trying to run away, but all he could manage was a rapid but awkward shuffle because his golf bag kept banging against the back of his legs.

Without looking back, Alex disappeared over the next hill. A lot would happen before they would see him again. Far above, an eagle flew back to its nest.

CHAPTER

12

When Do You Phone The Police?

"Eddie, we should try to catch up with him," Zack said, concerned about Alex's quitting. He remembered the time – the only time – he had quit on a round of golf and vowed never to do that again. He had played badly for six weeks after. Zack knew this wasn't just about Alex playing poorly. Alex was hurting. Anyone could see it.

"Nothing to worry about," Eddie answered. "Looks like you've got your timing down good. Do you want to finish the nine? I'll walk with you."

"I don't think so. Let's go back." Zack hoped Alex would get over being upset and they'd find him in the

clubhouse. Still, he wondered why Eddie didn't want to catch up with him.

Eddie has always been my best friend, and has helped me with everything. Why didn't Eddie care anything about Alex? I hope Eddie isn't taking my side against Alex. Alex may have been wrong about the rules, and he may have become upset about playing poorly, but he deserved an 'atta-boy' for trying. I've heard when you go to college, you change. Is that what was happening to Eddie?

Back at the clubhouse, there was no sign of Alex. They looked in the snack shop and restroom. Nothing.

"Eddie, we *have* to tell Coach Phil about Alex," Zack insisted. The guy in the pro shop hadn't seen the Coach.

Realizing the Coach must still be on the course, Zack jumped behind the wheel of the nearest golf cart. If Eddie hadn't run and jumped in alongside, Zack would have left him behind.

Zack left the paved cart path and cut across the back of the driving range

where they almost got hit by flying range balls. Zack made a beeline to a high part of the course from where he could spot the Coach. The ground was very rough and not intended for carts. Zack knew he could handle the cart and smiled when he glanced over to Eddie who was holding on with both hands.

From their vantage point they could see the Coach on the fifth hole, and Zack began waving his arm to get his attention.

Coming to a skidding stop in front of Coach Phil, Zack said breathlessly, “Alex left the golf course and we can’t find him.”

“We’ll find him,” answered the Coach. With a quick wave of his arm, the Coach let Eddie know to get out of the cart. “You can stand on the back bumper if you want to come,” the Coach offered.

“No way. I’ll walk back,” Eddie said.

Zack asked, “Where do you want me to drive?”

“Just head toward the sixth hole. I know he’s not behind us,” Coach Phil commanded. Zack floored the pedal

sending them racing across the golf course.

"Did Eddie have something to do with this?" Coach asked.

"No. It was between me and Alex".

"I hope so." Coach Phil pulled out his cell phone, dialed the pro shop and asked whether Alex had shown up yet.

"He's not at the clubhouse. Keep going." The Coach's mouth was set, hard.

CHAPTER

13

A State of Emergency

This wasn't the first time Zack and Coach Phil had faced an emergency. Last summer on the driving range, Eddie was

taking a short practice swing and accidentally hit little Bobby Hutchinson on the side of the head. Bobby grabbed his ear with both hands and fell to the ground. Eddie saw Bobby's cut ear. He told him he wasn't hurt bad and should get up.

The Coach came running and, pushing Eddie aside, pressed on the cut. Seeing that the boy wasn't hurt too badly, he yelled for someone to get some ice – fast. Zack was closest to the line of carts, and, even though he was too young to legally operate a cart, he didn't hesitate. The other kids were just standing around watching. He jumped in the cart, hit the pedal and ran it over to the ice dispenser, grabbed a bag of ice and, with a "Look out! Coming through!" ran the cart up alongside the Coach who was kneeling next to the fallen boy. "Here, Coach!" He almost threw the ice bag at the Coach.

"Good job, Zack," the Coach said with a smile, making a smooth catch.

"Will he be OK?" Zack wanted to know.

“Yeah, his eyes are open and he’s talking,” the Coach answered confidently. Bobby was soon up and walking around.

Coach motioned for Eddie to follow him into his office.

In the space of two minutes, Zack’s quick thinking and compassion cemented the bond between him and the Coach like no other kid at camp.

But that was last summer. There had been no accidents since then. Except for one thing -- Alex had disappeared.

As the campers straggled in from the golf course, they were welcomed by Coach Phil and the camp counselors. The campers, dog-tired, some with shoes untied and shirttails hanging limply out of their shorts, dropped their bags anywhere and everywhere.

Next to the big scoreboard, three tables loaded with cold drinks, bananas, apples and cookies had been set up. Zack stood anxiously nearby, while the campers shuffled around the tables, filling hands and pockets with their favorite treats. Filled their mouths too. ‘What did you

shoot?' became 'Wash shu shoo?'

The area around the big scoreboard was soon crowded with golfers straining to see their scores being posted. Zack could only watch and wait, hoping to see Alex appear from somewhere.

After all the scores had been posted, trophies were awarded to the top three players in each group. Small plaques were given to everyone else just for participating. Keisha had won low gross in her stroke play competition, so she got a big trophy. Because he hadn't finished his match, Zack was the only one who didn't receive an award. Zack, and Alex too.

A half hour had passed with no sign of Alex, so the Coach went into the clubhouse to phone Alex's parents.

Eddie, Zack and some campers were milling around the parking lot, the campers waiting for their rides home. Keisha saw Zack and walked over, still carrying her trophy.

Suddenly, a car turned into the lot, tires squealing, and stopped just a few

feet from where the kids were standing. The driver, a tall, dark-haired woman leaped out of the car. Leaving the door open, she leaned down to speak to the passenger in the car.

"You stay in the car," Mrs. Redondo commanded. The other person was Alex, her son.

"Where is your Coach?" she demanded as she approached Eddie.

"He's inside the clubhouse, ma'am," Eddie replied.

With both hands, Mrs. Redondo lifted her hair off her neck as if to get ready for a fight like Zack saw his mom do when their neighbor's dog pooped on their lawn. Mrs. Redondo stormed past Eddie and Zack, disappeared inside, slamming the clubhouse door. Zack and Eddie could only wonder what was going on and why Mrs. Redondo was so mad at the Coach. Alex sat in the car as he was told to do, his head turned away.

Zack said to Eddie, "We need to find out what's going on. I'm going to talk to Alex."

“Hey, hold on. It’s all up to the Coach and Alex’s mom now,” Eddie answered, grabbing hold of Zack’s shirt sleeve.

“Eddie, I was playing with Alex when he ran away. I want to know what happened.”

“I’ll tell you what happened. Alex is a crybaby who can’t stand being beaten. That’s what happened.”

“Isn’t anyone going over to talk to Alex?” Keisha almost demanded.

Zack looked at Keisha and explained, “I want to talk – to find out what happened – but Eddie doesn’t think it’s a good time.”

“Well, I do,” said Keisha, gesturing with her trophy. “Why should this be a secret? Zack, if you’re really Alex’s friend, you need to go over and talk to him.”

CHAPTER

14

A Brilliant Recovery

At that moment, the clubhouse door opened. Coach Phil and Mrs. Redondo

stepped out, side by side, headed for her car, and stopped by the open window where Alex was sitting. After a few, quiet words that Zack couldn't hear, Alex meekly got out of the car. Together, all three walked back into the clubhouse, the Coach's arm around Alex's shoulders.

Zack and Eddie were left in suspense.

Keisha stood with her hands on her hips. "When will you people start talking to each other," Keisha mumbled, loud enough to be heard.

Zack and Eddie waited on the clubhouse porch. Twenty minutes dragged by. Keisha had settled nearby. Finally, Coach Phil and Mrs. Redondo reappeared, this time accompanied by a changed Alex. No longer sad and timid, Alex hugged his mom, shook hands with the Coach and, passing by Eddie and Zack, said only, "I'll see you, Zack." Zack noticed Alex was carrying one of those small participation plaques. Alex and his mom drove off. The Coach turned and slowly walked back.

Zack blurted out, "Coach, what

happened? What's going on with Alex? What did you say to him? What did he say about me?" Zack desperately wanted to know how things had been worked out.

Coach Phil noticed Keisha standing nearby and asked her to join them. Keisha eagerly formed a huddle with the Coach, Zack and Eddie.

"Zack, do you remember what I said this morning when all the campers were together? I mean about riding your bike up a steep hill? Well, that was only the first part of the lesson. The rest is – and this is what I explained to Alex – there's nothing wrong with getting somewhere up the hill and because you're so tired, you stop. 'If you're that tired', I told Alex, 'I want you to get off the bike, I want you to stop -- completely.' Then Alex looked at me and I knew he didn't get it, because he said, 'Coach, it sounds like you're telling me it's OK to quit.'

Zack was confused. "Yeah, Coach, sounds like quitting to me too." Keisha gave Zack her best 'I don't believe what you just said' look, but Zack missed it. He

was so tuned in to the Coach.

"Zack, I'm not talking about quitting. I'm talking about not doing things halfway. When we're learning something new, we have to be patient with ourselves. We have to do things step by step. And if we don't get the results we want right away, we need to keep at it. If we do things halfway, we never find out how good we can be. That's what happened to Alex. He thought he could figure things out by himself, but when he didn't get better, he thought he'd *never* get better. What made it worse, he thought he's the only one in the whole world who ever had this problem."

"You see, all of us have to remember to ask for help from people who know what they're doing. By trying to do everything on our own, we have nowhere to turn if we don't make the grade. It doesn't do any good to pretend you're a "pro" when you're still learning. The important thing is to admit you're a beginner, catch your breath, ask for help, feel strong again and ride up that hill

feeling good about yourself."

"So I reminded Alex he's not a failure if he can't play as well as he'd like. I said he needed to give himself some more time, and keep asking for coaching -- because he's coming along just fine."

"But Coach," said Zack, trying to understand. "Alex has been playing golf for two years, and he hits the ball a long way. So why isn't he having more fun on the golf course? I've never seen anyone get so upset."

"Oh, really. Are you so sure?" answered Coach Phil. The Coach fixed his gaze on Zack and waited.

"Zack, do you remember when you first starting playing golf? You were impatient with everything – especially yourself. You walked fast -- you almost ran after the ball. You swung the club fast, you talked fast. And most of all, you didn't understand why you couldn't shoot par after playing for one whole summer."

"Yeah, I know, but Alex has been playing for years."

"That's right, Zack. But what you

don’t know is that Alex is a year younger than you.” Coach Phil looked directly at Zack and smiled.

Zack nodded, and returned the smile. “Coach, is that why you named us ‘Eagles?’

“What do you mean? Coach Phil asked.

“You always seem to be watching out for us -- especially when we fall out of the nest.” Zack held his smile waiting for acknowledgment from Coach Phil. The Coach returned the grin with his own, so Zack knew he had gotten through.

“Well, I’ve got to get back to the pro shop. Zack, if you're going to hit a bucket of balls, tell them the Coach said 'no charge'. I'll see you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER

15

The Eagle Limps Home

"Well, it's been a heckuva day. I'm going home," said Eddie, pulling out his car keys. "It's a good thing you're not like

that Alex kid," Eddie chuckled over his shoulder as he disappeared around the clubhouse.

There he goes again, Zack thought. *What does Eddie have against Alex?* But Eddie didn't stay around to explain.

Zack and Keisha were alone now.

Ordinarily, Zack wouldn't have left the golf course without working on his latest swing thing. Instead, he was re-living that day's events. He could picture when he first met Alex. He remembered thinking Alex could be a great golf competitor and buddy. He had admired Alex's putting style. He had even promised himself he would try the Alex style. Zack wasn't bothered that Alex was a lot younger – he was tall and athletic and could really hit the ball. But would he grow up to be a friend? A good friend? He remembered all the times Coach Phil had been patient with him when he was younger, and was thankful. The Coach was still a good guy, but what about Eddie? Keisha had been right, he thought. It's more important to make a

friend -- and keep a friend -- than try to figure out everyone.

Keisha interrupted Zack's thoughts. "Zack, are you thinking about Alex? Are you happy with how things turned out?"

"Oh, I'm hoping Alex comes back to camp," Zack responded openly, trusting Keisha to understand his feelings. Her warm smile told him she did. "Heck, I still have a lot to learn about playing the game myself -- and understanding the rules," Zack admitted to Keisha. "And that business about Alex playing from the red tees – that rule isn't important anymore. But it makes me wonder about Alex."

The silence was a moment only true friends could share.

Zack joked, "But I'd better learn the real rule in case someone tries to pull that one on me again."

They laughed together, though not for the same reason. Zack laughed from relief – from having done the right thing. He hadn't made fun of Alex, and he hadn't bullied him. He felt good about himself.

Zack knew why Keisha was laughing too. Keisha was laughing because she admired him. He felt the same way about her.

Finally, Keisha's dad arrived to pick her up. She couldn't wait to tell him all that had happened. As she closed the car door, Keisha waved goodbye to Zack. He returned the wave and waited until the car disappeared into traffic.

Tired, but pleased with the world, Zack headed across the golf course to get his bike. His only worry was whether his mom would be upset about having to make dinner for him so late.

CHAPTER

16

Ruffled Feathers Can Still Fly

The next morning, Zack biked over to Eagle Links for the second day of golf camp. He felt strong. He had slept well. After a big breakfast, his head was clear and any doubts from the day before had been forgotten. He sped over the paved road in the bike lane, sounding out the rhythm of the tires on the asphalt seams – tuh-too, tuh-too, tuh-too.

Two blocks from the golf course intersection, he stopped for a red traffic light. Poised with one foot on a pedal and the other on the ground, he waited for the light to change. Suddenly, the breeze turned sweet like the scent of freshly mowed grass. A crack of thunder roared across the sky from behind. Startled,

without waiting for the light to change, he pushed off to get rolling again, knowing what was coming. He dodged through the automobile traffic and landed safely on the opposite sidewalk. All at once, the air turned chilly.

Here it comes! It's too late to stop and put on my poncho! In just a few seconds, a torrential rain beat down on Zack, pounding his face and neck.

He pedaled as fast as he could. For two blocks through the dense rain he struggled to avoid the light posts and fire hydrants. The rainwater was already a half inch deep. His bike sent a two-foot rooster spray off the back tire. He made a sharp left turn into the golf course driveway, but the golf bag over his shoulder swung right, causing him to lose his balance for an instant. Skidding, he swerved, caught himself in time, picked up speed, and headed for the clubhouse.

No time to lock up my bike. I'll wait till the rain stops. But I've got to get my clubs inside. He hopped off with his golf bag, letting the back wheel glide forward

between his legs. The bike rolled ahead by itself, then flopped down on the grass outside the clubhouse door, front wheel spinning. Zack was already inside.

Once out of the rain, Zack realized how soaked he was – all the way to his underwear. Rainwater filled his high-top sneakers. His golf bag was tons heavier. *I'll go inside the locker room, squeeze out my stuff and get dry.* He knew his mom had put some

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things to wear in his golf bag, just in case.

Laying his golf bag down outside a locker room stall, Zack stepped in and latched the door. His dripping clothes quickly formed a slippery puddle on the tile floor as he began to undress.

"I can squeeze the water out of everything and put them on again. At least for now." He wrung out his shirt, shorts, underwear, and socks, one by one, in the bowl. He did his best, but everything was still damp, cold and crumpled. "No way can I put this stuff on again," he said, disgusted. Then, just to prove him right, the air conditioning kicked in and he started to shiver.

He hoped his mom had packed a spare shirt and that it would still be dry. That would be a start. Reaching under the door, he pulled the golf bag into the stall by its strap. He unzipped the long pocket. There they were – a shirt, a sweater and an extra golf glove, but they were all soaked. There was only one thing he could do now.

"Hey, anyone out there? he shouted.

“Hello! Someone! Hello!” he continued. “Why doesn’t someone hear me? Heh-eh-eh-eh-l-l-p!”

No answer. No a sound from the clubhouse.

Someone should have begun asking questions about my bike outside the clubhouse door. They should come searching for me any second. W*hat if someone <u>does</u> come to help me. I have no clothes on! And no clothes to change into.*

Bang! The locker room door slammed. “Anyone here?” a voice shouted.

“Eddie, is that you?” Zack called, recognizing the voice.

“Zack? You in there? I figured that was your bike outside,” Eddie said.

“I’m OK, but my clothes are soaked and I’ve nothing to wear.”

“Hey, kid, you live in Florida, don’t you? Don’t you know to carry a poncho or a rain suit?”

Zack didn’t understand why Eddie was putting him down. And he didn’t like it either.

“The rain hit me so fast, I didn’t have time to put it on,” Zack shot back.

“I guess you’re not as smart as you think you are,” Eddie answered without a smile. “Look, I have things to do. I don’t have time to fool around. If I see some clothes and things in the pro shop, I’ll see if I can get them for you.

Zack had never heard Eddie speak to him that way. It was the voice of a bully. He sounded like a kid who thinks he’s better than everyone else.

“When will you be back?” Zack was shaking from the cold. No answer. He heard the locker room door slam closed. Zack began dancing up and down to keep warm.

CHAPTER

17

You're All Wet, Eddie

A few minutes later, Eddie burst into the locker room.

"You still there?" Eddie knocked on the stall door.

"Where else could I go? Did you find any clothes?" Zack couldn't see over the stall door.

"Yeah, put these on. Throw me all your wet stuff. Okay, meet me at the maintenance building. I'll throw them in the dryer down there. But that's it for me." Eddie flipped the dry clothes, one by one, over the top of the door, and, without waiting for a 'thank you,' was gone.

Zack looked at the things Eddie had brought. No underwear. The pants came down over his knees -- which wasn't *too* funny looking. But the waist was so large he needed to wrap it around his middle before tying it up with a belt. The short sleeve shirt didn't look *too* bad, but it was so long it almost hung out the bottom of the cargo pants. The socks, which must have belonged to a lady, were trimmed in pink at the top so he had to fold them down a couple of inches. His sneakers

weren't dry yet, but he put them on anyway.

"I hope I can get out of here without anyone seeing me," Zack wished. He stepped cautiously from the locker room to the lobby of the clubhouse.

Campers were standing at the big picture window with his back to him staring out at the dark gray sky. Good thing too. Maybe he could blend in without being noticed.

Just then, one of the campers, Artie Snippet, turned, looked Zack up and down, and whispered with a snicker, "Who dressed you today, boy?"

"It's a pro shop special," Zack answered, returning the sarcasm with his own.

Zack kept his place at the back of the pack. He didn't have to ask about the weather. The rain was coming down as hard as when he had first arrived. You couldn't see ten feet ahead.

The windows were starting to fog up, but outside a blur of yellow flashed by for an instant before it burst through the

clubhouse door. It was Coach Phil. The waiting faces brightened to see him, eager to hear the news – good news, they hoped – that camp would indeed happen that day.

The Coach took off his broad-rimmed rubber hat and struck it against his leg to knock off the rain water. A circle of water drained onto the floor, spotlighting where he stood.

"Boys and girls -- some bad news. There's been so much rain in such a short time that the golf course is flooded. We've got lakes out there. There's no way we can play today. Even the practice areas are soaked. If we waited for the rain to stop, the ground would be so soft we'd ruin the course – especially the greens. Sorry, but that's it. So what you need to do is phone your folks to pick you up. You can use the phone in the pro shop and in my office."

Zack didn't wait around to hear the kids' usual whining and groaning. He almost sprinted to the back door of the clubhouse. He knew a golf cart was

always kept there, and sure enough, there it was. A four-sided vinyl enclosure built into the cart protected him from the rain. He stomped on the pedal and peeled some rubber, steering the most direct way to the maintenance building. He wanted his own clothes – and fast.

The inside of the maintenance building was so dark, Zack wondered how they could do any work. He would rather have been outside in the gray light of the rainy morning.

When Zack walked in, Eddie turned on an overhead light.

"I knew you'd be here as fast as you could," Eddie chuckled.

Zack was silent.

"Another few minutes in the dryer and that'll be it," Eddie said stiffly. "Did the Coach cancel camp?"

"Yeah, everything is flooded," Zack said.

"So that's all for today, huh?" Eddie

"I think so. But right now I just want to get my clothes on."

Zack looked around at the dim and

dirty workshop. The smell of old oil and kerosene irritated his nose. He almost gagged on the smell coming from the corner.

"That's the stuff that kills bugs, isn't it? It sure stinks." Zack didn't try to hide his discomfort.

"Yeah, the stink kills them," Eddie joked. "Didn't you know?"

Zack didn't like being made fun of.

"Ding" went the OFF signal and Zack beat Eddie over to the dryer, opened the door and grabbed all his stuff in both hands.

"Where can I change, Eddie? I'm not going back to the clubhouse in this weird stuff."

"There's *our* locker room behind that door." Eddie pointed to the doors in back behind some old mowers being overhauled, parts scattered everywhere.

Zack didn't see a "Men" or "Women" sign on the doors, but he figured either one was OK. He stepped gingerly over the greasy floor -- over the tires, oil pans, wrenches, nuts and bolts -- and reached

for the door knob on the left.

"Not that door – the one on the right," Eddie motioned."

Zack side-stepped to the door on the right, and as he opened it he turned to Eddie, asking, "How can you tell this is the Men's?" Zack didn't see that he was walking into a storage closet stacked solid – floor to ceiling, front to back --with cases of oil. He hit his head against the rock solid boxes.

"Hey, cut it out," shouted Zack in pain, angry with Eddie and angrier with himself for having fallen for such a dumb trick.

"I didn't do anything. Watch where you're goin' next time."

"You're a jerk, Eddie," Zack screamed. To himself. Gently massaging his forehead, Zack stepped into the real washroom and locked the door. He re-entered, now wearing his own dried clothes and holding the borrowed stuff.

"Leave those things here." Eddie reached for the bundle. "I'll use them for rags. No one would ever want them.

Where you going now?”

“I don’t know. What do you care? I’m outta here, though.” Zack started for the open garage door.

Without giving or expecting a goodbye, Zack walked through the shaft of light that was the morning sun. Outside, he took a deep breath of fresh air. *Why is it Eddie always wanted to help him with golf, but was such a doofuss the other times?* If he never again talked to Eddie, it would be OK with him.

CHAPTER

18

A Day With No Golf?

Zack ran back anxiously to the clubhouse, half expecting his bike to be gone. But there it was lying on the grass -- wet, but waiting. He let out a sigh of relief.

In the men's locker room, he found his golf clubs just where he had left them outside the stall. He lifted a couple of clubs out of the bag. The grips needed wiping, but no problem. He grabbed a bunch of paper towels and, with his golf bag over his shoulder, went back outside to dry his clubs and wipe down his bike.

Finally, everything was cool again. Sitting on the club house steps, his chin resting in his hand, he considered all he had been through since leaving his house that morning. He felt like he had already put in a long day at golf camp. But without the golf!

Now what? I've got a whole day here.

I don't want to go home. Nothing to do there.

The library? Naw, it's too nice a day. Maybe, if it starts to rain again.

What do other kids do when there's no one at home and there's no one to hang out with?

The movies! Do I have enough money on me? Even if I do, no way I'm sitting inside for two hours. Anyhow, they're not open yet.

I know. I'm doing something completely far out! I'm going some place I've never been before. And I have the whole day to do it.

The farthest I ever rode on my bike was about fifteen miles to watch the high school World Series. That wasn't very smart. If I could've driven a car, I could've taken the expressway. But I had to go the long way through Bishop and Rock City. Too many cars. Nobody cares about a kid on a bike. One guy blew his horn at me. Lots of times I had to ride on

the sidewalk because the drivers were so nuts. Up and down sidewalks isn't fun. By the time I got to the game, I was zonked. The game was pretty good, but I didn't know if I could make it home by myself. I didn't want my mom to pick me up. I didn't want her to think I couldn't make it. I got on my bike, and started out slowly. I made it home, but was too tired to eat dinner. I slept real well though.

Where else? Where else? It's so hot now after the rain. Someplace cool. But outside. A swimming pool would be nice. Nah, I've already changed my clothes too many times today. And I'm always hotter after I finish swimming. But water is a good idea.

The river! Yeah! The river! How far is it? It must be five miles to the expressway – and – maybe another five miles to the river? I don't know that part of the county, but I know I can bike it! Where on the river? A place far from the road, with lots of trees, where no one can see me and I can't see them. Where I can sit on the shore, and watch the water; not

hear the cars and trucks. The only sound from the birds. Almost like the golf course!

So Zack got on his bike and, with his golf bag over his shoulder, headed west. *I'm leaving all that noise about Eddie and Alex way behind me. I'm ready for some fun!*

CHAPTER

19

We Need to Talk

Biking five miles on his side of the expressway was easy for Zack. He knew

where the busy roads were and how to avoid heavy traffic. The underpass of the expressway was just ahead and he caught the green light. But as he sailed out from under the rumble of the eight-lane expressway, the light on the other side turned red. Slowing to a stop, he had a problem. The road turned left and right; it didn't go straight ahead. Which way to the river?

I'll take the right turn. Either way, I'm sure I'll cross a big road heading west.

Having made his decision, Zack picked up the pace. He could see a traffic light ahead. He checked for cars and made a left turn onto a two-way street. He was back on track again.

The other side of the expressway looked a lot different from his part of town. Small shops lined both sides of the avenue -- a drug store, a camera shop, a barbershop, and a small restaurant. Across the street was the Odeum theater with only two movies playing. A woman pushing a baby carriage and a man with a

dog on a leash passed each other on the sidewalk. He couldn't remember sidewalks on his side of town. No one walked anywhere -- they always drove. Further on, a park occupied an entire block – with tall trees, benches and a fountain pool. Old people sat on benches, enjoying the shade, talking in pairs, reading a newspaper or just sitting.

This must be a nice place to live, Zack decided. *I'm going into the next restaurant I see for a cold drink. I'm dry as a …*

Across the street, a sign in a store window caught his eye:

"Iced Tea" and "Fresh Sandwiches."

That's for me!

Zack crossed the street and locked his bike to the light pole in front of the restaurant.

Inside the door, he looked around, wondering where he could sit without his golf bag getting in someone's way.

"Hey, Zack!" He turned toward the voice.

Standing tall in the last booth was

Alex, waving at him.

"Zack, it's me – Alex!"

As surprised as he was, there was no way Zack could pretend he hadn't heard Alex. He could have just walked out, but their eyes had met. *When you don't know how to talk to someone, what do you do? What do you say? Alex is acting like nothing ever happened at golf camp yesterday.*

Zack resisted every step -- like when the teacher calls you up to the front of the room -- but slowly made his way down the aisle between the tables, making sure his golf clubs didn't hit anyone at the tables. He faced Alex who was now sipping an icy drink.

"Hi, Alex. Watcha drinkin'?" Zack tried show he was pleased to see Alex.

"Hey, man! What're you doing over here? Too bad camp got rained out."

Zack wasn't going to say another word until he was sure he could handle this.

"You know I live around here, don't you?" Alex continued.

What's with this kid? Zack thought*. He's acting like I rode this far just to meet up with him.*

"Alex, we have to talk."

"OK." Alex swung into the booth and sat down on the edge of the bench. "You should try this drink."

"What is it?" Zack asked, setting the golf bag against the wall on his side of the booth.

"A Purple Pleaser. You should get one. Only a dollar."

"What makes it purple?"

"I don't know. Grapes, maybe. But it doesn't taste like grapes. It's really good."

The waitress arrived and Zack ordered a chocolate shake.

"Alex, I need to know what's going on with you," Zack started, not knowing where the conversation would lead. But he was determined to have it.

"What do you mean?" asked Alex, more concerned with his drink than Zack's inquiry.

"Please put down that drink so we

can talk," Zack asked, weakly. He didn't have a clue about what he should say next.

"OK, it's down. So what do you want me to say?"

That made it easier for Zack.

"Tell me what happened yesterday. I think I know what the Coach told you – he tells all us kids the same thing. But what were you thinking when you and I were out on the golf course? What made you run off like that?"

"On the golf course?" Alex picked up his drink again, fiddling with the straw. He started wiggling; his nostrils flaring. He took a big breath then blew it out, puffing his cheeks.

Zack saw a guy who needed to talk before he exploded. And sure enough -- what Alex had to say gushed out non-stop.

"Zack, you don't know how I felt the new kid at camp when the Coach put me in with the Eagles I had to prove I was as good as the rest I knew I wasn't when you discovered that I was faking my chip shots all the other kids saw me mess up I tried

to cover it up couldn't do anything right on the golf course made things even worse when you were beating me in four straight holes I knew everyone would see I was a jerk so wanted to make friends it wasn't going to happen I ran away even though I knew it was the wrong thing to do hoping the Coach would tell everyone make it right when I came back but didn't ever want to come back."

With a deep breath, Alex stopped. He took a sip of his drink. His shoulders and neck relaxed.

Zack sat motionless, not sure whether Alex needed to continue.

But Alex was all talked out. His eyes remained fixed on Zack, unblinking, asking for understanding.

In a flash, all Zack's opinions and guesses about Alex vanished. Zack had been where Alex was coming from – many times.

Zack leaned forward, meeting Alex's gaze. "Oh, you mean you were scared."

It was a statement, not a question -- a moment of pure understanding coming

from shared experience.

Alex needed to be sure Zack understood. "You mean you've been scared too?" Alex sat up in the booth again.

"Yeah. I guess it happens to everyone," Zack said thoughtfully. "You never know when it'll happen for the first time, but when it does – wow! – it's a lesson you never forget."

"You mean you don't get scared anymore?" Alex edged closer across the table.

"No, that's not it," Zack explained. "I still get scared, but each time, it's a little easier. It's like meeting up with a scary dog on the way home from school. He chases you, so you run as fast as you can. The next time he doesn't chase you as far. The next time he barely notices you."

The waitress brought Zack's shake.

"So what should we do now?" Alex asked.

"Well, I was heading for the river," Zack said. "Hey, wouldn't it be neat to go

fishing? Except we don't have fishing rods." Zack sat back, set back.

"I've got a couple of great fishing rods," Alex offered. "And I know where to fish too. I caught some really big ones once." Alex was getting excited. "First, we'll stop at my house and get the rods and my fishing box. And some drinks. I know where to get bait too. Are you ready for this?"

They gulped down the remainder of their drinks and paid the bill with quarters, dimes and nickels. Zack reminded Alex that they needed to leave a tip. They settled on a total of fifty cents.

Hopping on their bikes, they pedaled like crazy for Alex's house and the fishing gear.

CHAPTER

20

Three Wishes and a Tackle Box

Zack and Alex rode side by side down noisy Main Street, dodging cars pulling in and out of parking spaces, pedestrians crossing in the middle of the street, and smoky bus exhaust. As they neared a red traffic signal, Alex stood up on his pedals, burst ahead of Zack and with a quick 'Let's get out of here – follow me,' made a wide right turn into a side street with Zack following skillfully behind.

They rode alongside each other down a smooth, residential street with white

fences, lots of trees and well-kept front lawns.

"That's where I live – over there." Alex pointed to the third house down the block as he maneuvered a quick right turn up a driveway onto the sidewalk.

"I'm right behind you," Zack yelled out, rising in the saddle as his bike bounded up the steep drive.

"I don't think my mom's home yet," Alex said.

The boys rode to the end of Alex's driveway, braked into a skidding stop before a quick dismount. They leaned their bikes against the garage and trotted to the back door.

"Mom, are you home?" Alex called out as he pressed the porch doorbell.

There was no answer to the call or to the bell.

"It'll be OK. Let's get the fishing stuff. Wait, I have to get the key to the garage. You can wait here." Alex unlocked the back door and disappeared inside.

Zack sat on the porch steps and

wiped the sweat off his forehead with his shirt sleeves. Alex's back yard had long beds of flowers that had been planted carefully along the length of the house with carefully placed red, gold and white flashes of color. On a patio near the middle of the house, four white wicker chairs surrounded a large, red table An orange tree, heavy with ripe fruit, stood boldly in the center of the spacious, grassy lawn.

"Wow, what a great place to practice chip shots," Zack said out loud, full of awe.

The back door slammed as Alex reappeared.

"What did you say? Alex asked, sitting down beside Zack.

"Who cuts the grass in your yard?" Zack wanted to know.

"We have a guy who comes over once a week. Why?"

"You should tell him to cut it a little shorter so you can practice some golf shots? Zack pointed to the orange tree. "You could get a lot of good practice

hitting wedge shots over that tree."

"Are we going fishing or not?" Alex held up the garage key.

Zack nodded and stood up. "Let's do it."

On a shelf in the garage were a tackle box and three fishing rods. Alex pulled down the box and two rods and set them on the garage floor.

"Who uses the other fishing rod?" asked Zack.

"That's my mom's," answered Alex.

"OK, whose the third one?" Zack didn't like guessing games.

"That was my dad's," said Alex quietly.

"Do you live with your dad too?"

"No. My dad died three summers ago. I live with my mom."

"Oh. I didn't know about your dad," Zack said. "Did you all go fishing together?"

"Sometimes. Mostly it was just me and my dad."

'Mostly me and my dad.' Zack wished he could say that and have it be

real.

"That's cool." Zack finally managed to respond, as he fiddled with the fishing rods.

"Where's *your* dad?" Alex wanted to know.

"What do you mean, 'Where's my dad?' He's around." Zack whipped the fishing rod in mid-air as if to test its flexibility.

"Do you play golf with him," Alex asked.

"No. Not any more. I haven't played golf with my dad for a while." Zack flexed the rod faster and faster, causing a whirring sound like a sword being brandished against an unseen enemy. Zack's knuckles turned white as his gripped tightened on the rod's handle. The faster he whipped the rod, the louder the whirring sound became.

"Hey, Zack!" Alex shouted. "What's going on? Stop it!"

With one last swipe of the rod, Zack shrugged to a stop and slumped into a wooden garden chair.

“What’s going on, Zack?

“How many times did you go fishing with your dad, Alex,” Zack asked, as he slowly calmed down.

“A lot. Why do you want to know?” Alex was puzzled.

Zack was sad now, not angry. “Because I’ve never been fishing with my dad. Because I haven’t played golf with my dad since forever. Because my dad didn’t die, and I still don’t get to see him.”

“I don’t understand,” Alex said, settling down on the garage floor, waiting for Zack to continue.

“My mom and dad are divorced. My dad lives in another state – New Jersey – and I don’t see him at all. The last time I saw him was two years ago when he came down for the holidays. He said we’d play golf, but we never did.”

Alex waited, but Zack was finished with his story. He was finished with the sadness and he wanted to move on.

“So, where did you fish with your dad?” Zack brightened up.

“Mostly on the river. Every

weekend. Holidays too. That's when my mom went along. We used to own a boat. Not any more. We'd go out on the river. Bring sandwiches and drinks and a radio. We'd start out trying to catch fish. We'd put shrimp on the hook. Or worms. And throw the line over. We'd watch the bobber and listen to the radio. My dad liked the stations that played songs – songs with words. He'd sing along. Me and my mom would sing too. Sometimes we caught stuff, but it didn't matter much. We were having too much fun just singing and stuff. My mom said we made so much noise, we scared away the fish."

"When my dad died, we sold the boat. My mom said I should find something to do. That's when I started playing golf."

"Did you take lessons? You play like you did."

"Not real lessons. I practice a lot."

"Me too. Does your mom let you practice in the back yard?" Zack was leading up to something.

"No way. It's out of bounds. She

pays money to keep it up the way my dad did. No way she'd let me take divots." Alex chuckled.

"OK. But, we need to get to a driving range," Zack urged.

"Yeah, there's one not far from here. But not today. I'd rather go fishing. Besides, I already found some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches mom always leaves for me. We can take them with us."

It was OK with Zack that Alex had made the decision for both of them.

"OK. Well, let's see what kind of stuff you've got here." Zack started digging into the tackle box. "Hey, look at all these lures. What kind of fish do we use 'em for? Lots of hooks, bobbers, sinkers. Everything we could want. This is great, Alex!"

"I guess it'll be OK if we use them," Alex decided.

"Why shouldn't it be OK?" asked Zack.

"All this belonged to my Dad. I haven't used anything since he …." Alex

paused. “Since the last time we used it.”

Zack had found someone who was familiar with loneliness, someone who felt it in himself and could feel it in others. “I guess we can go now,” Zack said, handing the fishing rod to Alex.

Alex clamped the fishing gear to his bike rack, and, together they set out for the river. The tug of thrashing, silvery fish filled Zack’s imagination.

CHAPTER

21

Not All Fish Love Peanut Butter

The mid-afternoon sun weighed heavily on the boys.

Zack had insisted, as always, on taking his clubs along. Before long, his shoulder got pretty sore. Alex's bike wasn't a fleet English racer like Zack's. He had an old, balloon tire Schwinn without gears for climbing hills, so he was working hard to keep up.

Laboring side by side up the hilly road west of town, Alex called out, puffing, "We're almost…at the top. Here comes the downhill. We can coast the rest of the way."

Turning left off the main road, they entered a narrow, paved path that began a long descent through a park. Over the

treetops they could see the river. A cool, light breeze greeted them.

The boys sailed down the hill and made a turn leading to the river. From a wide, grassy picnic area, they rode through a grove of trees, right down to the lapping water's edge. The place was exactly as Alex had promised. No stone walls to climb. No trees or bushes to interfere with casting their lines. Just a few yards away stood a giant oak providing shady cover whenever they'd want it. And a water spigot! *Hey, maybe Alex knew what he was doing, after all.*

"Man, this is great," Zack shouted over to Alex. He let his golf clubs fall easily to the ground and dismounted. "You get those rods ready. I'm going for a drink of water."

"Oh, no way!" Alex was still holding up his bike. "We forgot the worms!"

"You've got to be kidding!" Zack spurted drinking water out of his mouth like a statue in a fountain. He didn't know whether to blame Alex or himself for being so dumb.

He chose Alex. "So what are we supposed to do now? Is there a bait place in the park?"

"There used to be," Alex said. "Let's check it out. Over that hill, I think."

The boys found the bait shop easily – a little wooden shack standing out against the sky at the top of the hill. Alex read the sign above the solitary door:

Open Sat. & Sun. 7am – 5pm
Closed Weekdays
This is YOUR Park. Help Keep It Clean.

"Well, that's it for fishing." Alex turned to Zack. "What do you think we should do now?"

"I'm too hot to think," Zack sighed.

"We could go swimming," Alex offered.

Zack decided he had to take charge. "Nah, we're going fishing like we started out. Besides, I don't want to get wet again. I've already changed clothes twice today."

Zack thought some more. “Hey, bait’s no problem. All we have to do is pull up some grass by the roots. You can find lots of worms that way. And if we can find some boulders, we’ll turn them over too. There’s all sorts of bait things living under rocks.”

“Won’t work,” Alex waved away Zack’s idea. “I tried it once. You find lots of crawlies, but they won’t catch fish. Somebody just made that up. You have to buy real bait at the store.”

Zack stood there, deflated. He had heard that a lot, and figured it was true. He remembered now. Alex was right. But Zack was already working on Plan B.

“I’ve got it!” Zack clapped his hands in triumph. “Those sandwiches you brought. We can make dough balls. Fish love dough balls.”

“Especially catfish.” Now Alex was into it. “Yeah, that could work! Let’s do it!”

Alex was clearly the more experienced fisherman. He showed Zack how to thread the fishing line through the

eyelets of the rod and, using a special knot, tie a hook on the end. After attaching a sinker a few feet from the end of the line, Alex snapped on a red and white bobber. Now they were ready to bait their hooks.

"Hey, wait a minute." Zack grabbed Alex's arm. "Let's eat some of the sandwiches before we give them all to the fishes."

"Good idea," laughed Alex.

Soon, the lines were in the water. The bobbers responded to the gentle river's ripples, white side up. The boys didn't bother sitting down on the grassy bank. Expecting an immediate bite, each stood at the edge of the water staring at his own bobber.

A couple of minutes went by. Five minutes. Zack laid his fishing rod on the ground and sat down.

"You won't catch any fish that way," Alex instructed.

"No kidding," Zack answered.

"I'm reeling it in," Zack announced as he wound up the line. "Hey, no

wonder. The dough ball's gone. But I didn't feel any bites."

"Sometimes the fish are so small, you don't feel 'em," Alex said reeling in his own line. His hook was bare also. "You have to be patient until a big one comes along."

"We won't catch fish here, Alex. Got any sandwich left?"

"If we eat all the sandwiches we won't have any bait for fishing." Alex wasn't ready to give up yet. While Zack watched, Alex rolled two little balls of bread mixed with peanut butter and put one on the hook of each fishing rod.

"I'm sending yours out too," Alex declared. Casting each line into the river, Alex secured the rods by jamming the butt ends into the soft mud of the shore line.

Zack was impressed with Alex's ingenuity, but not by the idea of trying to catch fish here.

"There's got to be something more fun than fishing." Zack was now working on Plan C. "Let's see. We have our bikes, the fishing stuff and my golf bag. It's too

hot to ride the bikes. And I've done all the fishing I want to do."

"I've got it!" Zack answered his own question. "We can hit golf balls! We can 'em into the river!"

"How can we do that?" Alex laughed at the idea. "There's no driving range here. Where will you get the golf balls?"

"I've got lots of old balls in my bag," Zack said as he yanked up his golf bag and unzipped the large compartment. "Eddie gave me a bunch of them to practice with. Look, there must be twenty balls here – at least."

Zack was taking charge again. "That's what we're going to do. You can share my clubs. We just need a flat place to hit 'em."

"Well, OK," Alex relented. "But wait'll I reel in the lines."

Zack was getting impatient. "They'll be OK there. Heck, we might even catch something by luck. Come on. Let's go this way."

With their fishing rods unattended and their bikes lying unlocked on the

ground, Zack and Alex trudged up the shoreline hoping to find a flat, grassy place to launch their golf balls.

CHAPTER

22

Two Fish Out of Water, and in Again

Trees and bushes lined the river's edge, making the boys' progress hard going. Not only couldn't they find someplace flat, but wherever there was an opening between the trees and bushes, there was only muddy ground.

"Let's climb the hill," said Zack after they had trekked farther than they had expected. "Maybe we can see a good spot from there."

Stopping halfway up the hill, the

boys turned and saw they had been going in the wrong direction. The open shoreline was on the other side of where they had been fishing. They could see the narrow path leading down to the river, and ...

"Zack! Who are those guys down there? They've got my fishing rods!" Zack spotted two kids standing on the river's edge where he and Alex had been fishing. Zack started to reply to Alex, but Alex was already on the run.

"Alex wait up! What are you doing?"

Zack slung his golf bag over his shoulder and chased after Alex, but the bag slapped against his legs, slowing him down.

"Alex, stop!" Zack paused to tuck the golf bag under his arm, and continued downhill, a dozen strides behind Alex.

"Alex, what are you going to do?" Zack said it in a loudest possible whisper, not wanting to reveal their presence to the boys below until they had a plan.

"I'm taking back my fishing rods," Alex loud-whispered back without turning.

"Listen to me. You have to stop. We need a plan." Zack was late with his warning. The intruders had spotted Alex.

Running full speed down the hill, Alex could scarcely avoid colliding with the two outsiders. Backing off, Alex demanded, "Give me those fishing rods. They're mine."

The closest intruder challenged Alex by holding the fishing rod behind his back. "Come get it if you can," he teased.

Zack stood at the edge of the clearing, not knowing what Alex was capable of doing.

Suddenly Alex made his move. Without a word, he charged the boy who had taunted him.

Taking advantage of Alex's momentum, the boy gave Alex a sideways push that sent him spinning off his feet and onto his back in the shallow water.

Zack charged into the circle, threw his golf bag at the closest invader while aiming a full body tackle at the boy who had pushed Alex into the water.

The one boy took the blow of the golf

bag, stumbled, tripped and fell on his back into the shallow water. The other boy side-stepped Zack's tackle, sending Zack head first into the muddy river where Alex was beginning to recover.

The two invaders didn't wait for Alex and Zack to regain their feet and wipe the water out of their eyes. Grabbing the fishing rods, they threw them out into the river as far as they could.

Lying in the shallow water, the wind knocked out of him, Zack watched a blur of fishing rods sail over his head.

With one last mocking stare at Alex and Zack, the two bullies started running up the hill.

"Zack, get up," Alex said as he pulled on Zack's arm. "We can't let them get away with this.

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We've got to get them."

"I'm not afraid of them," Zack said, getting to one knee. "But what can we do? We're all wet. Besides, isn't it bad enough we lost the fishing rods?"

"Don't worry about them," Alex was quick to respond. "Let's get those idiots and show them they can't push us around."

"And do what?" Still sitting in the water, discouraged by his inability to save the day, Zack put himself in Alex's hands.

Alex had a plan. "First thing is, let's grab a golf club. "Then let's find 'em and fix 'em good."

Zack hadn't seen this tough side of Alex before. Did he really want to bash those guys with the golf clubs? Would he really do it? Zack didn't want to fight the other boys, and he wouldn't let Alex take them on by himself. All he knew was he was in it all the way, no matter what happened.

Alex ran over to the bikes and, without asking, mounted Zack's English racer, clicked it into low gear and led the

way up the path. Zack followed, coaxing Alex's Schwinn into a slow but steady pace behind. On the way up the hill, Alex brandished his golf club like a conqueror's sword. Zack could only wonder how this whole mess would end.

CHAPTER

23

Fear Conquers All

Alex reached the top of the hill first, looked in all directions, and allowed Zack to catch up.

"Where do you think they went?" Zack asked, relieved to be coasting freely at last.

Alex had a plan "What would you do on a hot day after you had to run up a hill

and raced like heck to make a getaway?"

Zack got the message. "I'd want a cold drink."

"Right on!" Alex filled in the details. "Remember that convenience store we passed? I bet they're in there! It's about two blocks away. Let's creep up slowly and see if any bikes are outside."

Rolling slowly on the sidewalk, the boys kept an eagle eye on the street ahead. There it was – "Ralph's 24/7". And there they were -- two bikes leaning against the building just past the front door.

"Alex, we can't be sure it's them," Zack cautioned.

"Let's wait till they come out. Then we'll know," Alex said, gesturing with the golf club.

"If it's not them, I'm going inside for a cold drink myself," Zack promised, not joking.

"Wait a minute. Alex sat upright in the saddle, poised to take off. "Hey, someone's coming out. I think it's them. It <u>is</u> them! "Let's get closer – close

enough for them to see us."

"They see us! Let's go!" Alex stood on the high pedal and pumped.

The strangers steered their bikes into the street while trying to avoid spilling their 32-oz. drinks. Screaming his best war cry, Alex barreled down on them at full speed, the golf club poised on high like a spear. They struggled to mount their bikes and hold their drinks at the same time, but couldn't gain enough momentum to escape.

Alex came hurtling down on them, swinging the golf club over their heads, intentionally missing – just barely.

Zack followed closely with his own guillotine

attack, and a war scream as frightful as Alex's.

The bad guys panicked. First one, then the other, lost control of his bike and his drink The leader's bike hit the curb and his front wheel twisted, sending him over the handlebars in a gut-wrenching belly-flop onto the sidewalk. His fall was greased by 32-oz. of syrupy green stuff he'd never get to enjoy.

The second guy played 'follow the leader' crashing into his partner in crime and landed squarely on top of him. So did his drink.

Seeing their prey stretched out and groaning, Alex and Zack declared victory. They circled their vanquished enemies once more with war whoops so chilling, they caught the startled attention of people in the nearby filling station. And just as suddenly, they vanished into the setting sun.

Actually, the boys disappeared behind the "Ralph's 24/7" building, working to catch their breath.

"Do you think we ran them off? Zack

gasped.

"I think so, but we'd better be sure."

Cautiously they stepped inside Ralph's back door and discovered they could see through the length of the store and out onto the road in front. The bad guys had picked themselves up, but were limping. The bigger kid picked up his empty drink container

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and threw it at the other one who managed to dodge it. Yelling at each other, they wheeled their bikes down the street. The coast was clear.

The boys walked into Ralph's and stepped up to the front counter as if nothing unusual had happened. Zack ordered a drink for himself and one for Alex, and paid for both of them.

"We did it, Zack. Can you believe it? We showed 'em!

Alex's smile was so big, he had trouble sipping his drink.

Zack saw the real Alex for the first time. Today he wasn't like the kid who stormed off the golf course when he got off to a bad start. He was no longer a guy who would change the rules when he was afraid he'd fail. Today he fought for what was his, for what he wanted. He was someone who finished what he started and wasn't afraid to stand up for what's right when the going got tough. But more important, he knew how to be a friend and have fun. Today, Alex became Zack's best friend.

“Alex, don’t forget -- we have to go back to the river,” Zack said, dumping his empty cup into the waste container. “We have to get my golf clubs. I hope they’re still there.”

“Don’t worry. We haven’t been gone long. And don’t forget the fishing rods,” Alex said

“What do you mean, Alex? The fishing rods are gone. They’re down the river somewhere.”

“Wanna bet? Let’s go back and I’ll show you a trick I know. You know what else would be neat – we could go for a swim to cool off.”

CHAPTER

24

Underwear Comes Three to a Pack

Back at the fishing site, the boys found the golf bag where Zack had thrown it.

Zack said, “I can clean up the clubs,

no problem. But what about the fishing rods, Alex?"

"Look out on the river – out there where we were casting." Alex pointed thirty feet out. What do you see?"

"Nothing. Nothing's there. Except... except the bobbers! Zack was catching on to Alex's "trick". "I get it! The sinkers kept the lines from drifting, the bobbers show us where the rods are...."

Alex finished Zack's thought. "All we have to do is swim out, pull on the line and we can get hold of the rods,"

Zack laughed, "Let's do it. I'm still wet from the last time we went 'swimming'. Hey, have you ever been skinny dipping? Me neither," said Zack, without waiting for Alex to answer.

* * *

Only twenty minutes after Alex phoned his mom, Mrs. Redondo arrived in a neighbor's pick-up truck. They had agreed to meet at the entrance to the park area. Nothing had been said on the

phone about their adventures, except Alex asked his mom to bring two pairs of clean underwear, which she did. The wet outline and mud on the boys' shorts let Mrs. Redondo know they hadn't been swimming in the usual way. She gave Alex a new 3-pack of tidy-whities and pointed out a cabana where the boys could change. When they returned, they loaded the bikes, fishing gear and golf clubs in the truck and headed back to the city.

When they approached the Redondo home, Zack was surprised to see his mom standing in the driveway.

"I phoned your mom to meet us," Mrs. Redondo explained. "We're both waiting to hear what you boys did today. Now you can tell us at the same time."

"Mom! Mom! You'll never believe what happened," Zack ran to his mom and almost bowled her over with a hug. "What a day! It was awesome!"

"Well, honey, I can't wait to hear all about it. Let's get your stuff together and you can tell me on the way home," Mrs.

Parman said, returning the hug.

"I was hoping you could stay a while," Mrs. Redondo offered. We could hear about the boys' day and get to know each other. My name is Marie."

"Well, I suppose…. Of course. I'd love to. My name is Ruth. I'm so glad to meet you."

Mrs. Parman shook hands with Mrs. Redondo while Zack and Alex sealed the deal with a high five. Chatting all the way, the two moms went inside, followed by the boys. Two hours later, after finishing a large delivery pizza and a six-pack of cola, Zack and his mom said goodnight.

CHAPTER

25

Two Eagles Riding High

Alex returned to camp for the start of a new session. The boys were inseparable, whether in skills drills, competing on the golf course or just hanging out at lunch. They teamed up in best-ball competitions and assisted the Coach in the youngest kids' practice sessions.

The last day of camp came too soon. "Zack, there's no camp tomorrow. C'mon to my house. We can hang out and work on putting and stuff. My mom said it's OK if you stay for lunch."

"Sounds great! Let's do it." Zack stuck out his right hand. Alex smiled, put his hand in Zack's, and they shook on it.

“My mom said she would make it a special day,” Alex added. “I wonder what she meant?”

“Maybe she wants to make a special lunch for us,” Zack guessed. “That would be neat.”

The next day, when Zack started down Alex’s street, he noticed a very big, very flat cardboard box lying at the end of the Redondo driveway ready to be picked up by the garbage truck. The box seemed awfully familiar.

Zack pulled up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

“Morning, Zack,” Mrs. Redondo greeted him warmly. “Alex is in the garage. I’ll open it for you.”

Zack doubled back and waited for the garage door to open. Alex was standing just inside and next to him was a fully-equipped, black with pin stripe, generator-for-lights, complete with leather bag, English racing bike.

“Hey, Zack! This is the surprise my mom promised. It’s just like yours. Three speeds, tire pump, generator, saddle bag,

tool kit, speedometer. What do you think?"

"I think we have about two hours before lunch to try it out. Let's go!"

THE END